Online Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Academic Stress in University Students

Ruba Abdelmatloub MOAWAD¹

¹King Saud University, Saudi Arabia,
ramoawad@ksu.edu.sa

Abstract: The closure of schools, universities and educational institutions across Saudi Arabia, and maintaining social distancing as a preventive and precautionary measure against COVID-19, have all changed the mode of teaching from a conventional standard system to a virtual and online framework. Such a quick and sudden shift in the educational system might cause intense stress on students. This content research analysis aims to identify the academic stressors by analysing the worries and fears that students at the College of Education (King Saud University) are experiencing during the time of COVID- 19. The results show that the issue with the highest percentage of stress among students is their uncertainty over the end of semester exams and assessments.

Keywords: *Online learning; college VID-19; Academic stress; University students; Exams.*

How to cite: Moawad, R.A. (2020). Online Learning during the COVID- 19 Pandemic and Academic Stress in University Students. *Revista Romaneasca pentru Educatie Multidimensionala*, 12(1Sup2), 100-107.
<https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/12.1sup1/252>

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) was informed of a cluster of cases of pneumonia of unknown cause detected in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China, on 31st December 2019. The coronavirus disease (COVID- 19) was identified as the causative virus by Chinese authorities on 7th January" (WHO, 2020). Since then, thousands of people around the world have been infected and many have died. Maintaining social distancing is one of the measures the WHO has recommended for protection against the virus. Following recommendations by the health authorities to protect students and staff, the Saudi Arabian Government closed all schools, universities and educational institutions on the 8th of March 2020 as a preventive and precautionary measure. Ten hours later, the Saudi Minister of Education informed the nation that the education system would change from a conventional education to virtual classrooms that would be achieved through different online educational platforms (Saudi Ministry of Education, 2020). As a result, on Monday the 9th of March 2020, our mode of teaching and our perception of online learning in Saudi Arabia changed.

When it comes to online education and learning, many factors help it succeed or cause it to fail. For online education to succeed, both students and instructors must see the value of how it functions and have trust in the medium and the various online platforms. Just as students trust their instructors, teachers and professors to use these media to teach and explain whatever subject they are delivering, they must feel immersed and engaged in a rewarding social and educational experience (Hughes, et al., 2002). On the other hand, online education may fail if faculty members are not trained in using online programs, if online courses are not designed properly, or if there is inadequate financial management (Rovai & Downey, 2010).

Implementing new ideas, and strategies in a workplace can be difficult because of the beliefs and attitudes of the people working in that given place (DiMattia et al., 1987). Adopting new technology while teaching can also affect the success of students and educational institutions (Al Meajel & Sharadgah, 2018). At King Saud University (KSU), courses and training for academic staff in using online teaching and different media started over ten years ago, and many academic staff enrolled in these courses. However, for various reasons most did not use such media while teaching and evaluating students, such as a lack of trust in fully online courses, as well as the wide gap between management and the Deanship of E-learning and Distance Education (Aljaber, 2018). Yet, on March 9th 2020 numerous

lectures were given online as academic staff and online teaching experts came together to give instructions and online training to colleagues on how to use and implement online teaching.

Since then, the College of Education at KSU has followed online teaching through questionnaires sent daily to the academic staff and their students, inquiring about their experiences and the difficulties they are facing. In previous research, instructors have indicated some of the main difficulties they faced when using Blackboard as an online medium for the first time: problems managing time; this problem decreased after using the medium for some time and rearranging their teaching plan. They also indicated difficulties motivating students and assessing their understanding, especially with large groups and dealing with students' misbehaviours, particularly when students were late to enter the program or forgot to enter (Nguyen et al., 2017).

Many of the reasons and barriers behind the refusal of KSU academic staff to use Blackboard (the main medium of online teaching used by the university) were institutional reasons, technological difficulties, students and faculty barriers (Al Meajel & Sharadgah, 2018). One of the main problems and concerns in using Blackboard and online learning is the weakness of internet signals. However, such learning and teaching provides easier access to information and is accessible anytime and anywhere (Alkhaldi & Abualkishik, 2019)

With all the changes happening around us because of the COVID-19 pandemic: self-quarantine and maintaining social distancing, the use of online teaching by all academic faculty members of KSU, and the minister's overnight decision to change to online teaching, this study aims to investigate academic stress among KSU College of Education students.

Methodology

The research method applied a content analysis of a report issued by the College of Education following the first week of online teaching. A questionnaire was sent out to all students (male and female) enrolled in the College of Education (Islamic studies, Quranic studies, Early childhood education, Special education, Art education, Psychology, Education administration, Education policy, Education technology, Curriculum and instruction), enquiring about the difficulties they are facing.

Six themes of concerns (stressors) were detected in the students' response to the college questionnaire: 1) Exams (type and dates of the exams), 2) Assignments (type and amount of assignments), 3) Lecture time,

4) Home and academic settings (homes are not equipped for learning - some students do not have computers at home, or the living space is small, therefore attending online classes might be a challenge), 5) Using online platforms, and 6) Uncertainty (regarding the end of the semester, and the students have concerns about the fairness of online exams and assignments, as well as their ability to comprehend online lectures).

Results

The report by the College of Education indicated that 646 male students answered the questionnaire, yet only 77 of them wrote about their concerns, problems and fears (Figure 1).

Results in Figure 1 indicate that 32% of the students showed uncertainty regarding their assessment and the end of semester final exam, how they are assessed, how this semester will be calculated in their GPA, how their lecturers will deal with all their assignments, and if they will be assessed fairly.

A total of 17% had problems with internet speed or cost, while others had problems and concerns regarding their ability to use online platforms. This is why some students enrolled in the university's online training on how to use and work in Blackboard and other programs. A total

of 16% of students found learning and taking lectures at home inconvenient, 10% of these students are from the Art education programme. Their programme relies heavily on using college facilities to produce their artwork, and since no one is allowed on the university campus they found it difficult to finish their work. However, 3% of students found learning through online platforms rewarding and suitable, because they could learn and take lectures from the comfort of home and at a convenient time.

A total of 13% of students have concerns about an increase in homework and assignments because of the situation and the difficulties they are facing to secure data and references for their work, yet only 1% preferred assignments over exams. A total of 8% of the students found online exams inappropriate and unfair, while 3% feel that online exams are the best way to assess what they have learned, and the best assessment strategy under these circumstances. In addition, 4% are having problems with changes made by their lecturers regarding lecture times.

Regarding the fears and concerns (stressors) of female students, 438 out of 1,625 reported about the concerns and difficulties they faced during the first week after changing from the conventional system to online learning (Figure 2).

A total of 48% of the female students were unsure of the future and concerned about final exams, when will they be held, will they be online or held conventionally, and were uncertain regarding the way the exams would be generally assessed. Where the majority of them have no faith in online exams, they are not sure if their lecturers are sufficiently trained to use online platforms (most of these students did not know that from day one the university started training and retraining their staff through the Deanship of Skills Development to work with different online educational platforms to cater for all needs during the **quarantine**).

Out of the uncertainty the students encounter, exams are one of the key issues. Here, 18% are not in favour of online exams, and they are urging their lecturers to use different means of assessments even if they have to work more on different assignments. On the other hand, only 0.2% were in favour of more exams and less course work. While 11% are in favour of course work, they feel that they will gain more through research and course work than they will get out of exams. Nevertheless, 4% argue against adding more assignments because they were having technical issues accessing the university's digital library (which, by the second week, had been resolved by the university's technical support). Another 11% have issues with online platforms and the internet; either the internet is slow or costs a lot of money, or they did not take any training on how to learn and interact through these educational platforms (this has been tackled by the university's E-Transactions & Communications (2020)), or they simply do not understand online lectures.

A total of 4% are unhappy with changes in lecture time made by some of the lecturers. This was to avoid internet problems, particularly during mornings when most lectures are held. Therefore, some lecturers delayed sessions to the afternoon and some even after that; this is why this 4% are unhappy because it is impacting their life. Another 4% disagree with online learning because it is disrupting other duties, especially responsibilities regarding their families or children. They do not find learning and taking lectures at home favourable; on the contrary, it disrupts their learning.

Conclusion

Overall results indicated that the highest stressor affecting the students is the uncertainty they feel regarding exams, the end of the semester, and their assessment. As stress occurs when a person is uncertain about something important, it affects both the body and mental health (Peters et al., 2017), Universities across the world should be clear with their

plans for exams and assessments as soon as possible, as this would help to reduce much of the stress the students are experiencing besides the stress of the COVID- 19 pandemic. Demands due to an increase in course work that students are facing, specifically with internet problems and weak signals encountered by some students, is a stressor that puts students at risk of falling into depression. Symptoms of depression are increasing in university students during submission of their course work (Barker et al., 2018). Hence, academic staff are advised to give their students more time for course work submission, are requested to be clear about assessment methods, and not to add more work as a substitute for exams because of the new situation everyone is facing.

As the COVID- 19 pandemic moves from nation to nation, universities all over the world should instigate a number of measures to help reduce the negative psychological impact of the situation on their students, such as having proper online academic advisers, as well as psychological counselling for their mental health. Faculty members must be advised on how to incorporate new assessment methods to use with their students and embrace technology while paying attention to their students' experiences and effective learning (Sahu, 2020). Decisions concerning students should not be left to individual departments, they should be maintained and issued by the university's administration to avoid confusion and provide consistency, which would reassure students' regarding fairness and alleviate their concerns.

This research analysed reports conducted during the first week of the introduction of online learning at KSU. More research is required to understand what students are going through in different disciplines and throughout universities, how they are coping with these changes and new rules and regulations implemented by their universities, as well as how they perceive these changes impact their academic future while keeping in mind the diverse circumstances between students, universities, cities, countries and ways of life.

References

- Al Meajel, T. M., & Sharadgah, T. A. (2018). Barriers to using the blackboard system in teaching and learning: Faculty perceptions. *Technology, Knowledge and Learning*, 23(2). 351-366.
- Aljaber, A. (2018). E-learning policy in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and successes. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 13(1), 176-194.

- Alkhalidi, A., & Abualkishik, A. (2019). The mobile blackboard system in higher education: Discovering benefits and challenges facing students. *International Journal of Advanced and Applied Sciences*, 6(6), 6-14.
- Barker, E. T., Howard, A. L., Villemare-Krajden, R., & Galambos, N. L. (2018). The rise and fall of depressive symptoms and academic stress in two samples of university students. *Journal of youth and adolescence*, 47(6), 1252-1266.
- DiMattia, D. J., Yeager, R. J., & Dube, I. (1987). Emotional barriers to learning. *Personnel journal*, 68(11), 86-89.
- E-Transactions & Communications. (2020). <https://tp.ksu.edu.sa/>
- Hughes, S., Wickersham, L., Ryan-Jones, D., & Smith, S. (2002). Overcoming Social and Psychological Barriers to Effective On-line Collaboration. *Educational Technology & Society*, 5(1), 86-92
- Nguyen, N. T., Tran, H. A., & Luu, L. N. (2017). Classroom management: Difficulties facing fast-track teacher-trainees in the tutoring program. *The English Teacher*, 45(2), 84-95.
- Peters, A., McEwen, B., & Friston, K. (2017). Uncertainty and stress: Why it causes diseases and how it is mastered by the brain. *Progress in Neurobiology*, 156, 164-188.
- Rovai, A. P., & Downey, J. R. (2010). Why some distance education programs fail while others succeed in a global environment. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 13(3), 141-147.
- Sahu, P. (2020). Closure of Universities Due to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): Impact on Education and Mental Health of Students and Academic Staff. *Cureus*, 12(4), e7541. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.7541>
- Saudi Ministry of Education. (2020). <https://www.moe.gov.sa/ar/news/pages/co-2020-6432.aspx>
- WHO. (2020). <https://www.who.int/blueprint/priority-diseases/key-action/novel-coronavirus/en/>